teachIT workshop at ITU - Introduction to asynchronous online discussions – Annelise Agertoft

Strengths of asynchronous online discussions

Why use asynchronous online discussions?

Asynchronous online discussions are threaded discussions in online conference forums. Contrary to e-mail and plenary discussions in class they allow everybody to read the answers of everybody else in structured discussions of separate topics.

As discussions are asynchronous it is possible to reflect longer before answering. And possible to use others contributions to develop own critical thinking and construct new knowledge together. The way we propose to use online discussion forums is not to transfer some knowledge from one person to one or many other persons, but to let students use each other's messages as thinking tools. This can be combined with online group reflections on literature or questions from the lecturer.

Even with classes of up to 100 students everybody can become active when divided into groups of maybe 5 or 10 depending on how much in depth they need to go with the topic.

When planning the online activities well (or E-tivities as we call them), it is also possible to evaluate all students for instance by using quantitative criteria.

One of the fears when teaching large classes is that some students will drop out because they don't feel part of a social environment. Often teachers set up study groups to prevent this. Such study groups can be reinforced by assigning groups to online spaces where they can discuss topics in relation to teaching. Sometimes it is preferable to keep students in the same online groups during the whole semester. Other times it is preferable to remix the groups with intervals.

Some teachers who teach courses with projects start out with random online groups who discuss topics in relation to lectures. Then remix groups for the following week. This gives to student the opportunity to get a feeling of who they might want to choose to work with for the project.

Difference between e-mail and discussions in online forums

Everybody knows how to behave in e-mails. But online discussions in asynchronous online forums is different. Particularly if you wish to create collaborative knowledge building. It is important to produce a "book of conduct" or a protocol. But if you really want it to work, you as at teacher need to act as a role model. Particularly in the beginning until your students internalize the protocols of your course.

Here are some ideas for your students (and you):

Length of discussions period

Remember always to set a deadline for a discussion period. If you don't, you'll risk nobody takes the initiative to start. And people won't ever finish or conclude on the discussion.

2-3 days   Adequate if you want an intense but maybe not very elaborated discussion

1 week   Useful if you want the students to read some larger texts and integrate those in the discussion. Is also more flexible for students with other activities to take care of.

Protocols

- Choose an effective title for your message/post

- If you reply to someone and change the subject, change the subject title too

- One message/post = one topic

- Never more than ½ page pr. message/post. Less is more. And people don't have the time to read all you know about the matter

- Place new messages/post

    o in the appropriate module and

    o in the appropriate discussion and

    o as a reply (if it's a reply), and as e new discussion if its new

- If the reply is referring to just some part of somebody's post, then copy and paste their words into the start of your post. And give the post a specific title.

Size of discussions group

The size depends on at least two factors.

- Are your students supposed to produce something together on the basis of that discussion? If yes, then form smaller groups (up to about 5), because they will need in depth discussions and a lot of interaction.

- Are your students to a have just a broad discussion where many different points of views are requested in short messages? Then discussion groups can be much larger (maybe up to 15). But it is more likely that you should limit the groups to 10 in order to prevent information overload. Some students have all the time in the world, and they can "drown" their fellow students in lots of posts day and night.

Netspeak

- Don't use capital letters (that's shouting)

- Acknowledge the others! You are all resources for each other

- Tell what your student fellow did well, before you disagree

- If you are personally provoked by a post, wait ½ day before answering

Role of e-moderator, use of techniques as summaries and weaving

In general it takes some time to plan sessions with asynchronous online discussions. But once you have tried a couple of times and you really get it structured, it works really well. Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that the teacher is a rolemodel here. Show that that you take it very seriously.

Let your students experience you as a moderator first. But then begin to let them be moderators. But you continue to set the criterias for the discussions.

Once they have done it just a couple of times together with you, you should step back. This way they will get used to being active themselves and reflect themselves. For student online discussions to be very active, genuinely collaborative and polyphonic, the teacher needs to step back and take a different role. In student online discussions the teacher does not necessarily take the part as an expert. But takes on the part as the expert planner of e-tivities, the person who observes that the process is going as it should, and who is available for technical issues.

The first time students are trying facilitated online discussions, the teacher may assume the role as e-moderator and model how to act. In this process be informal in your writing style. This way you can ensure that students will spend more time on reflection than on formulating a perfect rhetoric contribution. In the following online discussion sessions it's a good idea to distribute the task as e-moderator to the students themselves.

An e-moderator does not give the right answer to questions or critique discussions that are going on. Instead she will sometimes sum up what has been said and point at interesting directions that the discussions might take subsequently. An e-moderator asks open questions that call upon reflection. The e-moderator invites students who have been silent for a while to share their perspective on the ongoing discussion. The e-moderator can tell who might have hidden competences that should be brought into the discussions. An e-moderator might choose to e-mail (outside the learning environment) students who are taking over the discussion and ask them to leave some space for those with a slower pace.

It is the task of the e-moderator to delete messages that are over the limit for acceptable conduct.

Of course you may also in some online activities choose to take on the very active expert role in the discussion.

Select and carry out learning activities that combine intended learning outcomes and drives students to genuinely collaborate

Of course the content of the learning activities must add up to the intended learning outcomes. But how do we ensure that students will actually take an active part in the online distributed learning activities? The best is to create E-tivities that can only be solved if the students collaborate. That is, create an activity where they share the same goal and need each other for solving it.

Each teacher can invent her own E-tivities, but we offer a list of E-tivities for your inspiration.

Quantitative and qualitative evaluation criteria to enhance active participation (and access to examination)

Applying quantitative and qualitative evaluation criteria in online discussions is one way of creating interaction between students at a high academic level. The criteria must be announced to students beforehand. Quantitative criteria can be to ask students to post so and so many messages, and reply to so and so many.

Qualitative criteria can be to ask students to post messages that add new information to the discussion or that sum up previous contributions and point at new directions for the discussion. The criteria you chose should be based on the intended learning outcome of the activity.

Resources

Read more in (only DK): Annelise Agertoft & Jørgen Lerche Nielsen: Undervisning gennem plenumdiskussioner på nettet, Tidsskrift for Universiteternes Efter- og Videreuddannelse, http://ojs.statsbiblioteket.dk/index.php/unev/article/view/5003